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ABSTRACT

The position this paper assumes views vocabulary not as single words but as phrases, sentences, and sometimes entire segments of discourse that act as single words. This view of vocabulary would be helpful in: (1) bringing the vocabulary aspect of instruction in English as a second language (ESL) closer to current research in language performance, (2) connecting communicative language teaching and notional functional grammar, and (3) learning the grammatical system of a language. Segments of language of varying length are called formulaic or prefabricated speech. Like individual words, they are stored in memory as units. First language acquisition research that views them as early units of language acquisition suggests that they may be used in second language learning to make storage and retrieval more efficient. Methods for teaching lexical phrases include analysis and creation of variations after a segment is learned, much as a first language is learned; and designing lessons that treat a single, predictable situation focusing on some communicative need and offering a few simple lexical phrases for dealing with that interaction, providing a routinized lexical framework for discourse. Further research into the timing of introduction of controlled variation is needed. (MSE)

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# LEXICAL PHRASES, FUNCTIONS AND VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

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## LEXICAL PHRASES, FUNCTIONS AND VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

When we think of vocabulary, we immediately think of single words on flashcards, in lists, underlined in texts or defined neatly in the pages of Reader's Digest. It may be advantageous to think of it in much broader terms, however, for in many ways phrases, sentences, and sometimes whole chunks of discourse act very much like single words do. Viewing vocabulary in such a way would be helpful, not only in bringing this part of ESL closer to current research in language performance, but also in helping connect some valuable insights of Communicative Language Teaching and Notional-Functional Grammar. Such an extended view of vocabulary may also be helpful for learning the grammatical system of a language.

These broader vocabulary categories consist of chunks of language of varying length, some of which never vary, others which vary to a certain degree, although all of them for one reason or another are stored as units in memory much as any single word. These chunks are usually referred to as 'formulaic' or 'prefabricated' speech, though they have been given several other labels.[1]

### Prefabricated Speech and Current Research

Formulaic speech has become the subject of a great deal of attention lately, in such diverse areas as natural language processing (Becker 1975), linguistic anthropology (Bauman 1977), first language acquisition (Wong-Fillmore 1976; Peters 1983), and second language acquisition (Krashen and Scarcella 1978; Yorio 1980).

This work takes a direction contrary to that of most linguistic theory, not only in focusing on language performance, but also in using other measures of economy to evaluate explanation. Linguistic theory accounts for structure in minimal and non-redundant terms, thus making the most efficient (and desirable) description of language the one that uses fewest number of units to account for the data. Descriptions of linguistic performance, however, seem to require different measures of economy. Many researchers feel that the storage capacity of memory is vast but that the speed for processing those memories is not (Crick 1979:219), so that we must learn shortcuts for making efficient use of this processing time. Many theories of language performance thus suggest that vocabulary is stored redundantly, not only as individual morphemes, but also as parts of phrases, or even as longer memorized chunks of speech, and that it is oftentimes retrieved from memory as these preassembled chunks (Bolinger 1975). This prefabricated speech has both the advantage of more efficient retrieval and of permitting speakers to direct attention to the larger structure

of the discourse rather than keeping it focused narrowly on individual words as they are produced.

## A Description of Pre-fabricated Speech in ESL

Vocabulary teachers have always recognized the need to include more than single words in their lessons. Two- and three-part verbs (put up, put up with) and noun compounds (elevator operator, card player) are usually treated no differently than other vocabulary. Many teachers have stretched the category to include idioms as well, phrases like kick the bucket, bite the bullet and put on the dog, reasoning that such phrases are actually unvarying units, frozen into that particular shape and not analyzable by the regular rules of syntax. Kick the bucket will not recombine into the passive *The bucket was kicked as will the similar kick the dog, for example. Many teachers thus see language as a dichotomy opposing 'vocabulary', which is any stretch of language in some way single and frozen, against the rest of language, which is multiple and generated from 'scratch'.

In 1978 Krashen and Scarcella, summarizing previous research, describe a third, intermediate category--language that is not completely fixed but is at the same time limited in the shapes it can take (Krashen and Scarcella 1978). They refer to phrases such as 'a little while ago' or 'down with the king' which permit some variation ('a year ago', 'a month ago,' 'a short time ago;' 'down with feudalism,' 'up with people,' 'away with all pedants') yet

still are relatively fixed in shape. These they call 'semi-fixed patterns,' which have alternatively, and more helpfully, been described as 'formulaic frames with analyzed slots' (Wong-Fillmore 1979). Peters summarizes research that takes the idea further and claims that ordinary conversation consists almost entirely of 'institutionalized clauses,' which, unlike idioms, can be analyzed by the normal rules of syntax, yet because of their usefulness or frequency in conversation are stored and produced as single units (Peters 1983). If we broaden the definition to include such stretches of language, Peters feels, then any sharp distinction between vocabulary and syntax collapses into a dynamic and fluid continuum, ranging from the completely fixed to the completely original.

Even though researchers do not agree about the extent of prepackaged language in actual speech, they do agree that there are such conventionalized structures that occur more frequently and have more automatic, idiomatically determined meaning than language that is newly put together each time. One attempt to describe these structures for teaching purposes was work based on research in natural language processing (Nattinger 1981). This research sees language use as basically a 'compositional' process, one of 'stitching together' preassembled phrases into discourse, and describes the following six types of 'lexical phrases' in terms of functional and structural characteristics:

(a) Polywords: short, fixed phrases, whose

meaning often is not analyzable by the regular rules of sytax. They can substitute for single words, so are often treated like regular vocabulary in ESL lessons: idioms ('kick the bucket'), euphemisms ('powder room'), slang ('better half'), two- and three-part verbs ('put up,' 'put up with').

(b) Phrasal Constraints: short, relatively fixed phrases with slots that permit some variation, many being non-canonical forms ('a year ago,' 'by pure coincidence,' 'down with the king'): greetings ('how do you do'), partings ('see you later'), exclamations ('you can't be serious!'), insults ('you creep').

(c) Deictic Locutions: short to medium length phrases of low variability, consisting of clauses or entire utterances. They are essentially monitoring devices, whose purpose is (1) to direct the flow of conversation by marking attitudes, expectations, concessions, challenges, defenses, supports, retreats ('as far as I know,' 'don't you think,' 'if I were you,' 'for that matter,' 'frankly,' 'I mean to say,' 'further to my letter of'), or (2) to exercise social control ('hey, wait a minute,' 'now look,' 'see here,' 'shut up,' 'and then what').

(d) Sentence Builders: phrases up to sentence length, highly variable, containing slots for parameters or arguments. These provide a skeleton for the expression of the entire idea. They are often non-canonical and discontinuous, and are used in a wide variety of social contexts ('not only X but also Y,' 'if I X, then I Y,' 'the ___er X, the ___er Y').

(e) Situational Utterances: usually complete sentences, amenable to the regular rules of syntax and highly dependent on the social context. They provide the framework for particular social interactions--greetings ('how are you today'), partings ('I'll see you next week'), politeness routines ('thanks very much for ___'), questions ('could you tell me ___')--and much of the language of social maintenance ('what's new,' 'cold enough for you,' 'I won't tell another living soul,' how have you been getting along with ___').

(f) Verbatim Texts: entire texts of different length with extremely low variability. Used for quotation, allusion, or frequently, as in the case of institutionalized chunks, direct use. These are memorized sequences (numbers, the alphabet, the days of the week), aphorisms ('the public seldom forgives twice'), proverbs ('a rolling stone gathers no moss'), and all of those chunks that a speaker has found efficient to store as units. Some of these may be general units, used by everyone in the speech community, while others may be more idiosyncratic, phrases that an individual has stored because they have been found an efficient and pleasing way of getting an idea across.

## Reasons for Teaching Lexical Phrases

This view of vocabulary for the classroom gains support from the fact that it is similar to one emerging from other work in cognitive science and language performance. Lexical phrases have been found to be natural ways of chunking language and of thus making storage and retrieval more efficient, for example. They are also consistent with the types of short-cutting devices that inevitably develop in mature, well-learned systems of knowledge (Peters 1983). These phrases also parallel those described in first language acquisition research, which describes children as learning language not by gradually accumulating and arranging small pieces into larger ones, but by beginning with large units which they learn to break apart into increasingly smaller ones. In this view, the child first acquires a socially relevant fixed phrase, and then, after comparing it with similar phrases, analyzes it as a semi-fixed phrase with slots, until finally breaking it apart into conventional lexical items and analyzing it by regular syntactic rules (Wong-Fillmore 1979).

Such an explanation of first language learning is an intuitively satisfying description of how one begins to master a second language. My first fumbling attempts at Spanish had me using the phrase 'tengo que comer' in any situation that called for the general meaning 'I am hungry.' Later, after hearing similar phrases used in other contexts, ones like 'tengo que ir' and 'tengo que comprar,' I was able to break apart the previous

fixed phrase into a semi-fixed phrase with a slot that could be filled by several different words, 'tengo que ___.' And after hearing other similar yet distinct phrases such as 'tengo hambre' and 'tengo demasiado,' I was able to break the phrase apart further into conventional lexical items.

This theoretical justification for teaching lexical phrases is encouraging, but perhaps the most immediate reasons for teaching them are practical ones. First, these phrases provide raw material for later analysis and segmentation, as will be explained below. They also provide practice with intonational patterns in the language since they usually consist of intonation or 'rhythm' groups (Brown 1974). Such phrases will likewise enable students not to violate certain lexical restrictions (*'an intense rock') nor produce as many incongruities of register ('*Whaddaya mean I am unable to go!'). Perhaps most importantly, these phrases will lead to fluency in speaking and writing, for they relieve learners of concentrating on each individual word as it is used by allowing them to focus attention on the larger structure of the discourse and on the social aspects of the interaction.

Methods for Teaching Lexical Phrases

One method of teaching lexical phrases is to get students to make use of them the same way that first language learners do, that is, by starting with a few basic fixed phrases, which they

then analyze as smaller, increasingly variable pieces, finally breaking them apart into individual words and thus finding their own way to the regular rules of syntax. More specifically, such a method might be put to work as follows. Pattern practice drills could first provide a way of gaining fluency with certain basic fixed phrases (Peters 1983). The challenge for the teacher would be to use such drills to allow confidence and fluency, yet not overdo them to the point that they became mindless exercise, as has often been the unfortunate result in strict audiolingualism. The next step would be to introduce the students to controlled variation in these basic phrases with the help of simple substitution drills, which would demonstrate that the phrases learned previously were not invariable patterns but were instead frames with open slots. The range of variation would then be increased, allowing students to analyze the patterns further. The goal is not to have students analyze just those phrases introduced in the lessons, of course, but to have them learn to segment and construct new phrases of their own on analogy with the kind of analysis they do in the classroom. It is when a student learns this that creative control of the new language begins.

But there must be more. We not only have to ask <u>how</u> learners go about learning language, we need also ask <u>why</u> they learn it; and from research in first language acquisition, as from that in other cognitive research, it seems clear that the answer has to

do with social motivation: children learn language as a part of a social interaction in which they have something they want to say. Language is best learned, that is, when it connects "with our plans, with our most important memories and with our needs" (Stevick 1976:36). This sociolinguistic dimension provides the cognitive depth that is crucial to successful acquisition of lexical phrases.

To include this affective dimension, we would design a beginning lesson to treat a single, predictable situation focused on some needed communicative function, and offer a few simple lexical phrases for dealing with that situation. Later materials would introduce the students to sets of more complex phrases that could also be used to express the same function, a kind of 'theme and variations' (Peters 1983:113), whose range of variation would broaden as learners became more skilled. These phrases would thus be presented in a cyclical rather than linear fashion, much as Wilkins suggests for his notional-functional syllabus (Wilkins 1976:59), so that students would return to the same functions throughout the course and learn to express them in an increasingly sophisticated manner. Many Communicative Language Teaching activities would provide a framework for introducing these phrases, especially those exercises that have students consciously plan strategies for interacting with others (DiPietro 1983).

What follows is an attempt to group routines in a way that will

be pedagogically useful for this sort of language teaching. These groups are not traditional grammar or semantic categories but are to some extent based on Wilkins' notional-functional categories, where emphasis is on the lexicon needed to perform specific speech 'functions' (Wilkins 1976). I have called these groups 'Social Interactions,' 'Necessary Topics,' and 'Discourse Devices,' and list some examples of each below:

SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

greetings/ closings: 'hello,' 'good morning'/ 'goodbye,' 'see y

politeness routines: 'please,' 'if you don't mind'
question/answer: 'do you ---,' 'are there ---'/ 'of course,' 'yes, there ---'
requesting: 'may I---,' 'would you mind if I ---'
granting: 'of course,' 'sure thing'
refusing: 'of course not,' 'no way'
etc.

Although this category, as well as the two that follow, contains all six types of lexical phrases mentioned earlier, it is characterized mostly by phrasal constraints, situational utterances and polywords.

NECESSARY TOPICS

language: 'do you speak ---,' 'how do you say ---'
shopping: 'too expensive,' 'department store'
autobiography: 'my name is ---,' 'I'm from ---'
quantity: 'how much is ---,' 'a great deal'
time: 'what time ---,' 'for a long time'
location: 'where is ---,' 'what part of the ---'
etc.

These are characterized mostly by situational utterances and sentence builders.

DISCOURSE DEVICES

fluency devices: 'you know,' 'it's been said that ---'
conjunctions: 'which means,' 'less likely that'
subordinators: 'in other words, 'not only ---but also ---'
logical connectors: 'as a result,' 'in spite of'
temporal connectors: 'the day after ---,' 'yesterday'
reinforcers: 'o.k.,' 'and then what happened'

probability/certainty
   a.modals: 'might,' 'may have'
   b.sensory predicates: 'it seems to me,' 'I think that ---'
etc.

These are often characterized by deictic locutions and sentence builders.

Social Interactions and Discourse Devices provide lexical phrases for the framework of the discourse, whereas Necessary Topics provide them for the subject at hand. Most linguistic encounters are composed of a patchwork of routines from all three of these categories. For example, one such typical encounter might consist of formulas for greetings, questions and politeness (all kinds of 'Social Interactions), formulas for time (a 'Necessary Topic'), and those for fluency devices (one of many 'Discourse Devices'). Part of such an encounter might be described as follows:

"Good morning (greeting:SI).
Could you tell me (question:SI)(fluency device:DD)
what time it is (time:NT)?
Thanks very much (politeness:SI)."

'Could you tell me' bears a double function above. It is a Social Interaction, for it is a routinized way of introducing a question, while at the same time it is a Discourse Device, namely a fluency device, because it is a bigger piece stitched into the discourse than the similar phrase in the encounter below. Being a bigger chunk, it gives the speaker more time to plan for the next routine, and thus promotes fluency:

"Good morning (greeting:SI).

What time is it (question:SI)(time:NT)?
Thanks very much (politeness:SI)."

Students already "know" these three categories, of course. What they have to learn is how to produce them fluently in the new language, by using the right lexical phrases on the right occasions.

Further Research

As promising as a lexical phrase approach appears to be, there are many questions about it that have to be answered. Just what sorts of routinized language is used in particular encounters needs to be explored and then assigned to appropriate categories. The categories themselves must be evaluated, not only pedagogically but also empirically and theoretically. It is quite possible that the distinction among Social Interactions, Necessary topics, and Discourse Devices obscures rather than clarifies, and more realistic ways of grouping are possible. There are also many questions about the method for introducing these phrases to students. It is clear that the best time to introduce controlled variation should come after students have automatic control of basic patterns but before these patterns have become fossilized and resistant to change. Just when such an optimum segmentation period occurs, though, needs to be investigated.

In spite of the uncertainties with method and description, a lexical phrase approach offers a promising new direction for

vocabulary acquisition, and for language learning in general.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Among the many labels suggested have been the following: 'idioms' (Fraser 1970), 'holophrases' (Corder 1973), 'praxons' (Bateson 1975), 'preassembled speech' (Bolinger 1975), 'routines' (Krashen and Scarcella 1978), 'frames' (Wong-Fillmore 1979) and 'conventionalized forms' (Yorio 1980).

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